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ABSTRACT

Women who wish to assume full voice in their writing have no choice but to raise questions regarding their status and the status of creative writing within the academy. Tillie Olsen and Elaine Showalter have documented the bias in texts taught at the university in which women have little place, if at all. The effects are devastating: if the voices of other women writers have been neglected, the beginning writer is likely to doubt her own voice as well. Small wonder then that both Susan Griffin and Olsen refer to "all women who write" as survivors. The woman creative writer faces an especially difficult task because creative writing is devalued in English departments. Having attained some degree of professional success outside the academy, the woman creative writer finds in graduate school that the work she does--the fiction and poetry that have earned her place--is by its very nature suspect, regarded as intellectually "soft." Traditional academic study--theory, empirical research--is considered essential, the arts supplementary. Creative work is reduced, then, to an "optional" discipline. As some of the same observations have been made about the field of composition, it is useful to compare the two. Both are concerned with what are traditionally regarded as "feminine" principles--intuition, emotion, self-expression. It must be acknowledged that it is no accident that these particular fields of study have assumed the low hierarchal spaces taken for granted within education. (TB)

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The Angel in the Academy:
The Creative Writer as Helpmeet on the Distaff Side of English Studies

Gayle Elliott

As Susan Griffin asserts, "Every Woman Who Writes is a Survivor" (305). Certainly, those women who find themselves in graduate creative writing programs have proven resilient. Women writers learn their craft within the strictures of a male literary tradition perpetuated by an educational system which is both androcentric and patriarchal. For the woman poet or fiction writer who makes it to graduate school, then, the achievement is by no means modest. She has learned to heed her own voice amidst a sea of male voices, strived to discern her own thoughts within thoughts framed for her by others. She has begun to see herself not as object but as *being*--as *self*, worthy of expression--this despite man's need to regard her as mere reflection: "She is the mirror in which the male, Narcissus-like, contemplates himself" (Simone de Beauvoir, in The Female Imagination, 23).

With every stroke of her pen, the woman writer must refute truths learned from earliest childhood, affirming with each word written that she exists not simply to mirror back to man the more mysterious aspects of his own nature, but to declare, separately, strongly, her own autonomous existence: *I am here*, she decrees. *"Why write?"* offers Joyce Carol Oates. "To read what I've written. *Why read what you've written?* Because, for all its possible flaws and omissions, no one else could have written it" (Oates 122). *I am.*

Tillie Olsen, too, asserts, "We who write are survivors" (Olsen 39). In Silences--often compared with Virginia Woolf's Room of One's Own for its impact upon women writers--Olsen examines the circumstances in which the making of literature is possible, considering those forces which "crucially determine whether creative capacity will be used and developed, or impaired and lost." Olsen's contribution proved crucial to an evolving feminist critique of a classical cannon which had, traditionally, excluded women authors. As

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Olsen observed, books in standard literature courses overwhelmingly featured male voices, male point-of-view (Olsen 24).

Elaine Showalter, too, documented this bias, studying "freshman texts in which women have little place, if at all; language itself, all achievement, anything to do with the human in male terms--*Man in Crises, The Individual and His World*" (Olsen 28). She noted:

> Women are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity. . . .They are expected to identify with masculine experience, which is presented as the human one, and have no faith in the validity of their own perceptions and experiences, rarely seeing them confirmed in literature, or accepted in criticism. . . (Olsen 29).

Such neglect within the canon is potentially devastating: literature courses and anthologies *define* artistic achievement; if the voices of other women writers have been neglected, the beginning writer is likely to doubt her own voice, as well. Small wonder, then, that both Griffin and Olsen refer to "all women who write" as survivors! It is a significant accomplishment for a woman to retain faith in herself, given such a context--for her to continue to feel she has something to say and the obligation to say it. In a world in which the voices of women have been muted and trivialized, the woman writer must, against the odds, develop enough confidence in her work to risk it to the scrutiny of editors, critics, and peers. Having rarely in her *personal* life been accorded fair hearing, she must write, nevertheless, as if she fully expects an attentive audience. Yet still more will be required if she is to succeed. As Tillie Olsen put it: "Beyond that: how much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one's right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for one's own life comprehensions" (27). The woman who writes must find for herself what has been accorded man freely: a sense of power and presence in the literary world.

Because of the competitive nature of most creative writing programs, many women seeking the Ph.D. or MFA have spent at least some time out of

school, writing--possibly teaching--before they return for an advanced degree. The woman poet or fiction writer has already begun, then, to define herself by virtue of her writing; through language, she has gained the freedom to reconsider, reshape, recontextualize her life.

She has begun finding her way, in words--has probably found at least modest success in the world--and seeks a graduate program as a means of deepening her artistic and professional commitment and beginning a life in which she can practice and perhaps teach her craft. Entrance requirements are stringent, competition fierce. Prior to acceptance, she's been scrutinized as both creative writer and scholar, her academic papers assessed alongside her fiction and poetry. She has almost certainly published. Yet when she reaches the academy, she finds, unexpectedly, that the work she does--the fiction or poetry which have earned her a *place* in graduate school--is, by its very nature, suspect, regarded by others--by literary theorists and critics--as intellectually "soft." This is a contingency for which she cannot be fully prepared.

Certainly, the *woman* writer is not alone in this discovery. The marginalization of the creative writer within the academy is shared by males and females alike. In "How to Be an Artist in the Anthill of Academe," Ron Tanner writes, "Who told me that I wouldn't be taken seriously if I didn't show them--the 'lit. types'--that I could play *their* game as well as mine? The truth is, nobody told me. I simply sensed it, the way I might have sensed animosity among strangers" (1). In most English Departments, one would hardly need a sixth sense to detect biases which are, after all, openly admitted.

As Susan Miller observes about her own discipline, "Composition conveniently. . . contained within English the negative, nonserious connotations that the entire field might otherwise have had to combat" (45). The same might, I think, be said of creative writing, also perceived as "nonserious," less intellectually rigorous than critical theory. One need only consider the difference in expectations for applicants to graduate school to know this is so. Those who pursue Ph.D.s in Creative Writing must prove their

analytical abilities prior to admission; in addition to creative writing portfolios, they also submit examples of scholarly work. There is no comparable requirement for theorists; that is, those committing themselves to the study of literary theory are never required to prove themselves capable of "creative" endeavor.

Tanner asks, "Why would so many literature professors ask me, in job interviews, what critical writing I have done or am planning? Why am I left to wonder, Do they ask a literature candidate what fiction or poetry *he/she* has in the works? Why the double standard?" I am left to pose the question, along with Tanner, "Why is it that creative writers are being asked to do All This And More?" (8)

Traditional academic study--theory, empirical research--is considered essential, the arts supplementary. Creative work is reduced, then, to an *optional* discipline; the creative writer embellishes--but is not essential to--the "real" work of English studies. The artist is to the English Department a kind of window dressing, decorative in the same way a well-dressed wife complements an influential husband attending a professional function: she looks stunning on his arm when he makes his entrance but can be left out of the discussion when the conversation becomes serious. Creative writing is considered a separate, unequal partner in the household of academe. And *any* one making a lifetime commitment to writing--woman *or* man--must find this notion galling.

But for a woman, the demeaning of the creative writer within the academy is even more disconcerting. Writing is, in and of itself, a struggle. As Olsen notes: "Add the aspiration-denying implication, consciously felt or not (although reinforced daily by one's professors and reading) that women writers, women's experience, and literature written by women are by definition minor" (29). The position assumed by the creative writer within the field of English, her lower-status ranking as an artist amongst scholars, is a replication of the woman's cultural position. Having finally arrived at a goal she has long

sought, having attained a place in the professional world, the woman writer finds herself still denied access to the power and prestige she has, by rights, *earned*. But perhaps her very marginalization--her cultural position as "outsider"--allows her to consider from a new perspective the dilemma of the creative writer in the academy. For Tanner admits, "It's the 'creative' aspect that distances us, that dirties us, no matter how we may qualify this qualifier" (1). There's a correlation here between the status of women and the status of art within the university. Just as females are subjugated within our culture--their "lower-status" position reflected also in our literature--so creative writing assumes a position, hierarchically, in English Departments beneath literature and theory, reflecting a gender-bias that pervades every segment of society. This being the case, conscientious writers should be concerned about the status of creative writing not only in terms of how it affects their craft and the making of literature, but also as a feminist issue.

Some of the same observations have obviously been made about the field of composition. It's useful to draw comparisons between the two, for creative writing and composition are sister subjects on the distaff side of English studies. And although both are relative newcomers to the academy, the creative writer--at least in terms of pedagogical discussions--is the "new kid on the block." Research in composition might prove instructive, providing a context for the discussion of the creative writer in the university and also of the "feminization" of the two disciplines.

There are obvious parallels between the two concentrations: both have been marginalized within the academy and isolated within English departments. Both are construed as lesser disciplines because they are perceived as "gender-coded." Composition is stigmatized because it's associated with pedagogy rather than theory; creative writing is labeled inferior because it, too, is associated with traditionally "feminine" principles, the creative process reliant, in part, upon intuition, emotion, and self-expression. Such terms further muddy the waters of discussion. (How does one quantify *intuition?*

Isn't *emotion* antithetical to *reason?* And doesn't self-expression presuppose a self--rather than a multiplicity of culturally embedded messages, as theorists imagine writers to be?)

Casey Miller and Kate Swift assert that such gender-biased terms convey basic underlying assumptions: ". . .our sex-differentiated cultural categories are in the main male-positive-important on the one hand, female-negative-trivial on the other" (Words and Women 51). We cannot, then, consider the status of the "feminization" of these disciplines separately from the cultural or institutional contexts within which they operate, and we must acknowledge that it is no accident that these particular fields of study have assumed the low hierarchical spaces still taken for granted within education.

As Susan Miller notes, "Within this process [of 'cultural codification'], the identity of the female person was specifically differentiated as 'woman' to supplement, complement, oppose, and extend male identity" (40). Can we not say the same of creative writing within the discipline of English studies--that it supplements, complements, opposes, and extends the more masculine endeavor of criticism/theory? And that it is this very distinction that causes the tension between writer and critic? Ron Tanner asserts, "A creative writer's learning and ability are automatically suspect in the academy because they are different: an artist's view, not a scholar's" (9).

Susan Miller observes that we are "accustomed to confessions that composition teaching, and composition research, are not something that 'regular' (meaning powerful, entitled, male-coded, theoretical) faculty do" (42). Creative writers, too, seem slightly embarrassed by comparisons to critics and scholars, constantly urged to test themselves on the same proving ground upon which their theoretically-based colleagues vie. The implication is that the creative process *itself* is a suspect endeavor, that because its origins are different than those required of scholarship, it demands no intellectual engagement, that it is, instead, the product of some ineffable sensibility, a mystery to which the uninitiated will never be fully privy. So the poet/fiction

writer is constantly being challenged to prove she has "the right stuff" for academia.

Here, as in so many instances, the woman writer can look for direction to Virginia Woolf. In A Room of One's Own, Wool observed that women--called upon to wear the mantle of Victorian spirituality--internalized the high ideals associated with literature, religion, and art. "The Angel in the House" was Woolf's metaphor for the Victorian concept of woman as icon--moral center of the household and of Victorian society. Woolf encountered this "phantom" each time she wrote: "The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room." Woman's angel-self, "utterly unselfish," was capable of nurturing others but never her own talent. As Woolf remarked, "She sacrificed herself daily." Thus, the Angel in the House had to be exorcised before woman could be free to write; Woolf hurled an inkpot: banishing it (Woolf).

There is a parallel presence in modern English Departments, for they, too, have internalized this split: the more "masculine" disciplines do the work of the world--emphasizing "the rational, scientific, and theoretical modes of knowing" vital to the interests of a competitive consumer society--while more "feminized" disciplines are relied upon to "keep house." Those who teach composition merely prepare students for the *real* work they are soon to undertake: the pursuit of a "cultural literacy that is the imagined important mission of a university as a whole" (42). The poet and fiction writer--the artist--while supposedly representing to the world the "higher," more rarefied aspects of the human condition is, at the same time, relegated to the lowest rung on the academic ladder. (If doubt remains about these differences in status, one need only compare the salaries of the scholar/theorist to the artist/writer.)

If the woman writer must first manage to kill off her own phantom--and Virginia Woolf insisted this was the work of *every* woman writer--she finds herself facing a similar spectre in the university, where she again risks

relegation to a lesser sphere, her art a kind of menial work discounted in the world. "Writers are the migrant workers in the word harvest. Our labor can be as nourishing as that which puts the earth's food on the table--and is considered as expendable and exploitable" (West 4).

A woman writer, then, faces double jeopardy: already having struggled with self-doubt because of her "lower" status in the culture, this image is reaffirmed when she arrives in academia and recognizes the place of the creative writer in the English Department hierarchy. And while it's true that male writers face a similar dilemma, they seem better able to take their marginal status with the proverbial grain of salt, probably because the disapprobation with which they are met in the university has no resonance of past discrimination; it does not re-enact similar clashes fought on the battleground of private life.

Women who wish to assume full voice in their writing have no choice but to raise questions regarding their own status and the status of creative writing within the academy. Doing so should enrich the discourse between writer and critic, artist and theoretician. But as long as the creative writer is viewed as "other"--as is woman--creative writing will maintain its position as an unentitled partner within the field of English Studies. Creative writers in universities face a vital task: they must rise together and, collectively, kill the Angel in Academe.

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